About Absence

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The orangutan Nenette in Philibert's film is like the Mona Lisa: a victim of her rarity, drained by curiosity. We watch her watching us watching her, writes **Emma Davie**. Another film in Edinburgh which also explores the "unseen" was *The Edge of Dreaming*.

The Edge of Dreaming

"Writing is about discovering things hitherto unseen. Otherwise there's no point to the process."

WG Sebald's maxim could equally be used for documentary making as some of the films shown at this year's Edinburgh Film Festival exemplify. There were 18 documentaries in total in a festival which plays a crucial role in introducing UK audiences to international authors. Although now known primarily for its fiction, it started as a documentary festival in 1947. The festival can only benefit from more documentary screenings: almost every screening was sold out. Clearly, we have a huge appetite for these visions of the real world and a need to "*discover things hitherto unseen.*"

The feature version of Philbert's *Nenette* was one of the highlights. Deliberately exploring the unseen, it was a profound, bold film.

Philibert consciously searches for the mysterious in his subjects. When he directed *Etre et Avoir* about a small school in France, he apparently spent months searching for the school with the right teacher. He wanted to find a character that embodied an ambiguity, something which eluded him as a filmmaker and us as viewers. During a fascinating talk, Philibert admitted he felt he had found "l'autre par l'excellence" in his new star – Nenette.

Slowly out of black, eyes appear. A mouth. Nails. A gaze. Like us but so not like us. Eyes which look way beyond us. Familiar and so different. Voices. A camera clicks. Nenette, an elderly female orangutan sits in a glass box in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris as we hear the voices of visitors, philosophers, zoo keepers. These unseen voices muse, tease, wonder, explain. We watch. Mesmerised.

Philibert revealed how for him Nenette is like the Mona Lisa. It is impossible really to see her. We watch her watching us watching her and our attempt to understand this exotic being dissolves. By alerting us to the act of seeing, the film becomes a conscious metaphor for documentary itself. How can we see beyond our projections ?

Philibert deliberately separates sound and image, liberating the viewer's eye to trace its own journey from perception to thought. Voices are edited like a musical composition over long uninterrupted shots of Nenette delicately moving her hands over knitted fabric or just gazing into some incomprehensible distance. We never see the commentators. Our imaginations fill in the gaps, but Nenette remains elusive.

A child reads the label "Nenette. Born in 1969 in Borneo. Arrived at the Jardin des Plantes 1972."

"Same age as your dad "says the mum. Other voices wonder: "I think she's depressed, totally depressed… Maybe her husband's dead already… You need someone even at her age." The voices disappear leaving Nenette in silence, pressed against the glass.

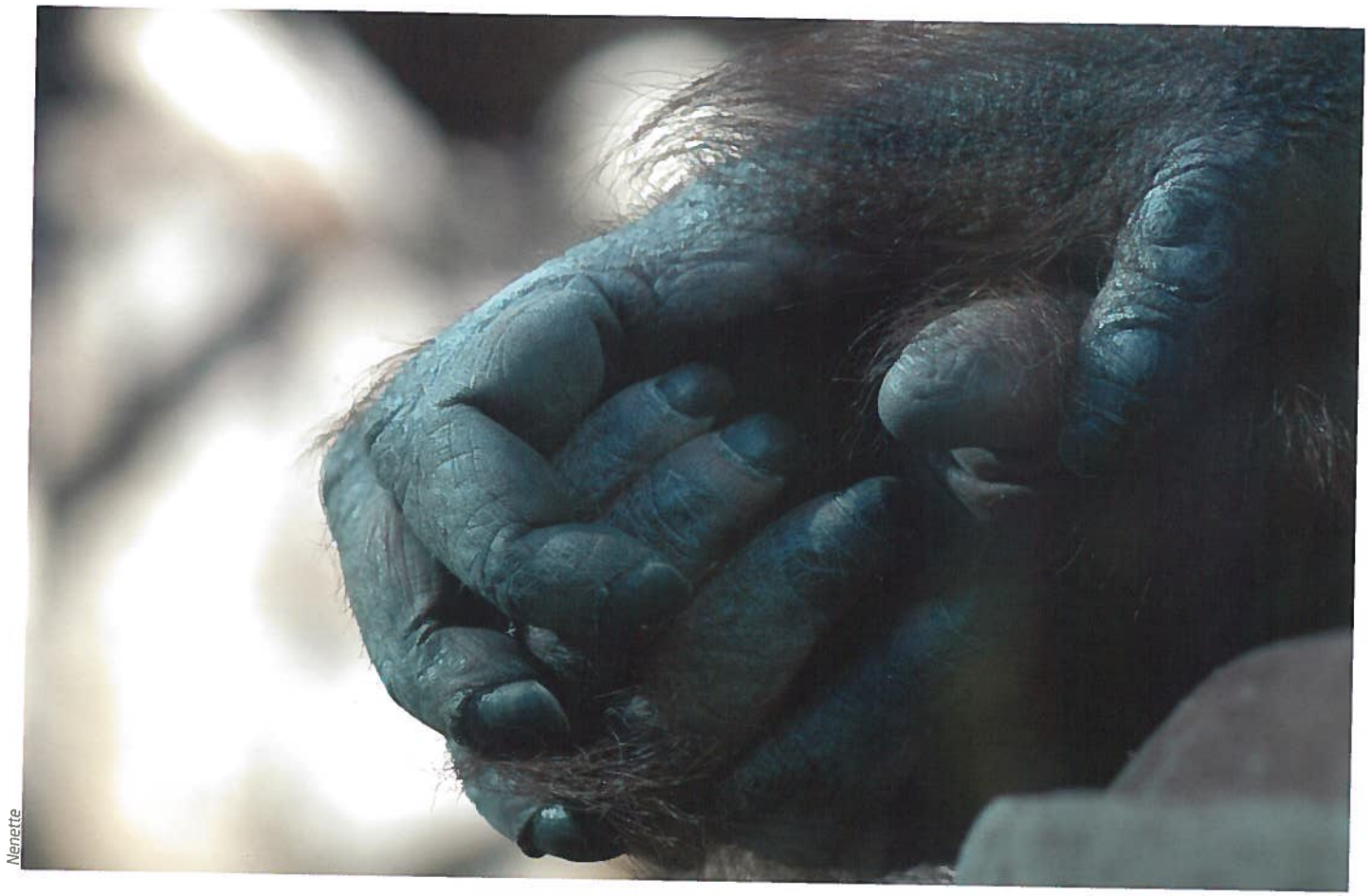
The comments reveal everything about us, nothing about her. The human is ever present. Even when the voices stop, the space resonates with the sound of footsteps, sirens, locks, voices of street protestors chanting, complaining against "too much video surveillance".

Nenette never escapes surveillance, the gaze, the voyeurism of the public, or of our projections, as we constantly wonder what she is thinking. Her own sound is non-existent. She is only seen, hyperconscious of the "peep show" which she provides – for Philbert she symbolises the foreigner who excites both fascination and fear. One of the commentators talks of how the thickness of glass is in proportion to our fear of getting closer. If the glass broke we wouldn't feel she's so familiar.

Her familiarity seduces us as she imitates the keeper, cleaning the glass of her box, or pouring her daily bottle of tea into a tub of yoghurt. Her intense gaze however, takes us to a more sombre, reflective space. Nenette is a victim of her rarity. As a voice in the film says, "She is drained by curiosity. She has seen all of us already. We all merge". Scratch marks on the wall suggest the horror of eternal captivity. She becomes symbolic of the nature we destroy in our attempt to control it.

The film, however, eludes any simplistic interpretation. Philibert uses his own curiosity as a structure, eschewing conclusions and creating a space which allows us to enter into a dialogue with it. As we watch her delicately eating her daily yoghurt, Nenette seems so near – but is unreachable. The gap between viewer and viewed is like a chasm. Ultimately, it is a film about us – about the captivity of our own minds, the worlds these minds have made. We are the unseen in this film, the ones who are really on display.

Other selected documentaries also explored the boundaries of the seen world. Amy Hardie's metaphysical exploration of her own death in *The Edge of Dreaming* is a powerful, original quest to understand the liminal zone between dreams and waking. Intimate, touching scenes of her family life intercut with interviews with scientists and a meeting with a shaman as she attempts to understand the role of a dream in predicting her own death. Re-creations of the dreams which affected her so strongly stay in the mind long after the film is over.



Nenette

the horror of eternal captivity

Canadian filmmaker Mike Holbloom's lyrical ode to his dead pal and long-time collaborator "Mark" questions the essential fabric of film in re-capturing the unseen – in this case, his dear friend Mark who killed himself. Over a slowed down image of Mark, he reflects: "It looks like he's here but he's not – his vanishing act goes unnoticed at normal speed." But however insubstantial the fragments of imagery are in re-creating a life, paradoxically, it also allows a self-effacing man who tried to hide in the shadows to be seen anew.

The Mouth of the Wolf by a young Italian director called Pietro Marcello is a poetic blend of fiction and documentary, which uses the unseen to depict the love story of a unique couple living on the edges of society in Genoa. Enzo is a striking man who as his lover Mary says: "could've been an actor with that face of his" but instead he got mixed up in some drama and ended up shooting three policemen with a gun "like Dirty Harry". In a sense the whole film is about absence; we don't see the lovers together until the very end but only hear the tapes which they sent while Enzo was in jail. Their words are filled with a tender love which transcends the harshness of their lives. Mary relates Enzo's past: how he had been reared in the petty crime of the city but could not adjust to the changed city after being in jail. His past interweaves with Genoa's: the flow of the sea, archival imagery of ships being launched, children playing and the crumbling walls of buildings as they are demolished – an industrial world gone forever. Enzo visits a senile priest he used to know and asks: "Do you remember little Enzo?" as he grasps his hand, trying to hold onto something which eludes him. The priest remains silent.

The intensity of Enzo and Mary's love is all the sharper amidst such dissolution. The nature of their love is only fully revealed at the end so the film uses the unseen to pull us into their world with an incredible raw tenderness, investing their love with great dignity. We eventually see them together in an extraordinary scene which fully reveals the love between Mary, an ageing transsexual and Enzo, a macho but sensitive soul. We hear how they met in jail, how their love grew, how they cared for each other – her mending his trousers, him protecting her from others in the jail. It was "the most wonderful four months "says Mary. "You gave me the best fourteen years of my life" replies Enzo and we see each of them through the "inner eye" of their beloved. Mary becomes beautiful and Enzo, heroic. Their unnoticed lives transformed by the power of being witnessed.

As with Philibert, the film explores the edges of the seen, using sensuous details to enable us to feel and understand the story through our skin so our experiences are visceral not just visual: It articulates something numinous and inexplicable which emerges as the love story interweaves the personal and geographical: "The places we pass through are an excavation of memory...the architecture of a lost world". It is hard to know where the real city starts and fictional city takes over as their love story infuses the whole space.

Marcello is also acutely aware of the disappearance of the industry and life that defined Genoa. Like Philibert, he works very consciously with the audience's imagination, leaving "unseen" spaces for us to claim.

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